

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

WATERFOWL HUNTING PROGRAM

Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge

Sacramento County, California

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is proposing to establish a new waterfowl hunting program on the 912-acre South Stone Lake Unit of Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge). The South Stone Lake Unit consists of the Lewis Investment Company, Lodi Gun Club, and Sun River properties which were acquired in fee title by the Service during 1994-2004. An Environmental Assessment (EA) evaluating the proposed hunting program was prepared by the Service (USFWS 2005). The Draft EA analyzed two alternatives and a No-Action Alternative. Under the No-Action Alternative, no hunting program would be implemented on the Refuge. The Proposed Action (Youth and Mobility-Impaired Opportunities Emphasized) in the Draft EA would have initially accommodated a minimum of 12 hunters but as funding and facilities became available over the next five years, it would expand to a maximum of 22 hunters. As originally proposed, hunting would occur two days per week, Wednesday and Saturday. Hunting would occur from ½ hour before sunrise until 12:00 P.M. The Proposed Action would emphasize opportunities for youth and mobility-impaired hunters. The Maximum General Public Hunting Alternative (Alternative C) would ultimately accommodate a total of 22 hunters three days per week, Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday from ½ hour before sunrise until sunset. Under Alternative C, opportunities for youth and mobility-impaired hunters would not be emphasized. In response to public comments received on the Draft EA, the Proposed Action was revised in the Final EA to include an additional ½ hunt day (i.e., Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday), beginning on the first Saturday in December until the end of the season. Also, the number of blinds to be assigned when the program is initiated, was increased from six to seven. In addition, parties of up to three hunters each (as opposed to two hunters each according to the Draft EA) will be allowed to occupy the two blinds reserved for youth hunters.

The Proposed Action was selected over other alternatives because it will provide compatible wildlife-dependent hunting opportunities, emphasizing youth and mobility-impaired hunters, that are not readily available elsewhere in the region. In addition, the proposed number of hunt days and hunting hours will ensure a quality hunt and improve the likelihood of hunter success, while maintaining use of the area by special status species (e.g., greater sandhill crane, giant garter snake) and other wildlife-dependent recreational users. Finally, the Proposed Action can be supported by current staff and budgetary capabilities of the Refuge.

Implementation of the agency's decision may result in a number of minor environmental, social, and economic effects. Harvest of waterfowl under this proposed program will have a negligible effect on overall population levels of various waterfowl species but could lead to minor flushing or inadvertent take of non-target species. The hunt program could lead to budget increases for the Refuge. The program could result in minor traffic increases along Lambert Road. An informal consultation under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act determined the proposed program is not likely to adversely affect the threatened giant garter snake. The program would have no impact on other species and the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of the

Refuge would be maintained.

Measures to mitigate and/or minimize adverse effects that were incorporated into the proposal include limiting the number and duration of hunt days to reduce adverse effects on waterfowl populations and other species. The program will be managed under the State-adopted Federal waterfowl framework which is designed to ensure the diversity and integrity of continent-wide waterfowl populations. In addition, hunters would receive an orientation to the South Stone Lake Unit to minimize any effects on biological resources.

The proposal is not expected to have any significant adverse effects on wetlands and floodplains, pursuant to Executive Orders 11990 and 11988 because all improvements necessary for the proposed program (e.g., roads, parking lots, blinds) were constructed when the planned hunting area was under private ownership. After implementation of this decision, the property will be maintained by the Service so wetlands and floodplain characteristics of the site are protected.

The proposal is not expected to have any significant effects on the human environment because Refuge law enforcement would patrol the area to ensure safety of visitors, hunter compliance, and discourage illegal activities (e.g., vandalism, littering, poaching, trespass). The proposal should also result in increased revenues for local cities and businesses. The program is designed to provide a safe, quality hunt while minimizing potential conflicts with the public. No prehistoric or historic cultural sites are within the area proposed for this program.

The proposal has been thoroughly coordinated with all interested and/or affected parties. Parties contacted included: adjacent private landowners, ranchers, local and State agencies, elected officials, tribal organizations, and private non-profit and for-profit organizations. The Draft EA, Hunt Plan, and Compatibility Determination were made available for public review and comment for 30 days starting on November 17, 2004. The Refuge received a total of 18 comments regarding the proposed program. Fourteen comments were in favor of the proposal and four were opposed. All parties commented on the proposed program will be notified through direct mailing that the Finding of No Significant Impact and Final EA and Hunt Plan are available on the Refuge website (<http://stonelakes.fws.gov>) and upon request from the Refuge.

Based on my review and evaluation of the enclosed EA and other supporting documentation, I have determined that the proposed waterfowl hunting program does not constitute a major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment under the meaning of Section 102(2)(C) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (as amended). As such, an environmental impact statement is not required. An EA has been prepared in support of this finding and is available upon request from the Service facility identified above.

Manager
California/Nevada Operations Office

Date

Reference: USFWS 2005. Environmental Assessment. Waterfowl Hunting Program. Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, Sacramento County, California. November 15, 2004.